

whispers of light | workings of splendor

BY

© 2012
Catherine Reinhart

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Arts
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Chairperson David Brackett

Mary Anne Jordan

Maria Velasco

Matthew Burke

Date Defended: Thursday, March 15th 2012

The Thesis Committee for Catherine Reinhart
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

whispers of light | workings of splendor

Chairperson David Brackett

Date Approved: Tuesday, April 17^h 2012

Abstract:

whispers of light | workings of splendor

The following thesis outlines the creation of Catherine Reinhart's Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, displayed in the Art & Design Gallery at the University of Kansas, March 12 - 16, 2012. *Whispers of light | workings of splendor* was a site-specific textile installation created through the methods of studio research, material studies, and literary investigation. The work deals conceptually with the dichotomous relationship between the human experience and the metaphysical realities of the Christian God, as explained through Holy Scripture. The result was an engaging textile installation that the viewer could enter and be enveloped. In conclusion, this installation is a genesis for subsequent site-specific works utilizing fiber and textile processes.

Genesis

Whispers of light | workings of splendor is a site-specific fiber installation consisting of a thirty foot column made with layers of silk, monofilament, and screen-printed cloth. The column descends from an open skylight above the viewer. It contains an entrance that invites interaction with the work. By stepping into the shaft of string and light, one becomes surrounded by the cloth and is drawn to the light of the sky.

By creating “filled” environments and a situation that entices one to linger and ponder, I wish to ignite a conversation about the glory of God, and to envelope the viewer in fabric, string, and light. Most decisions I make about my work are deeply linked to Christian theology. Yet it is my sincere hope to engage a viewer’s sense of wonder rather than demonstrate rigid orthodoxy.

Conceptually, I draw from the deep well of Christian scripture as the genesis for my work. The Holy Scriptures strain through the confines of language to describe the glory of Yahweh; they struggle to find powerful metaphors that are bathed in the radiant light of heaven. These passages ignite within me a strong desire to understand both the complexities of the Trinity and the reality of our grave human condition. We are finite and thus transient. The sons of man are like a mist, which quickly vanishes before an eternal God. *Whispers of light | workings of splendor* gives a voice to these desires and invites others into the conversation.

This ambitious work came from an ordinary source, namely, while listening to a sermon devoted to the glory of the Lord. As the preacher described the Shekinah glory of God through various passages in the Old Testament, I was taken over by a desire to draw. The resulting sketches became the vision for this installation. With this in mind I began to apply my attention to experiments with various fibers. Over the course of a year, I created several site-specific installations, experimented with materials, and developed test pieces relevant to the original vision. During these endeavors, I simultaneously dove into the conceptual development through the study of historical artists, contemporary makers, and Christian scripture.

Passages relating to the pure presence of God contain compelling metaphors, such as His robe filling the temple¹, the Shekinah glory of God², and a pillar of fire and cloud³. Yet,

¹ Isaiah 6:1 “In the year that King Uzziah died, [in a vision] I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the skirts of His train filled the [most holy part of the] temple.” *The Amplified Bible*.

² Ezeikel 10:18 “The glory of the Lord [the Shekinah, cloud] went for from above the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim.” *The Amplified Bible*.

³ Exodus 13: 21 “The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.” *The Amplified Bible*.

what intrigues most are the passages that describe man's connection with God, particularly through Moses, who was a foreshadowing of Christ. Despite the terrifying picture of God's glory, Moses approaches God with confidence⁴, as a friend⁵ in the tent of meeting. What a glorious thing it would be to speak to the Almighty, to be surrounded at once by overwhelming grandeur, yet invited in!

C.S. Lewis in his essay "The Weight of Glory" describes one longing of every human heart,

*"We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words-to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe into, to become part of it"*⁶.

It is here, out of the desire to reflect an infinitesimal amount of the glory revealed to me through these magnificent scriptures, and from the structure of the tent of meeting that I derive the cadence of my installation.

⁴ Exodus 24:16 – 18 "...[God] called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the glory of the Lord appeared to the Israelites like devouring fire...Moses entered into the midst of the cloud..." *The Amplified Bible*.

⁵ Exodus 33:7-11 "...Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend...And the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." *The Amplified Bible*.

⁶ Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 42.

Description

“Breath steps in”⁷

Upon entering the dim space, to the left falling from the ceiling are five large banners of white silk. Hung as pillars, these lengths represent the five columns that spanned the entrance to the Jewish tabernacle, and the ends hover gracefully above the ground.



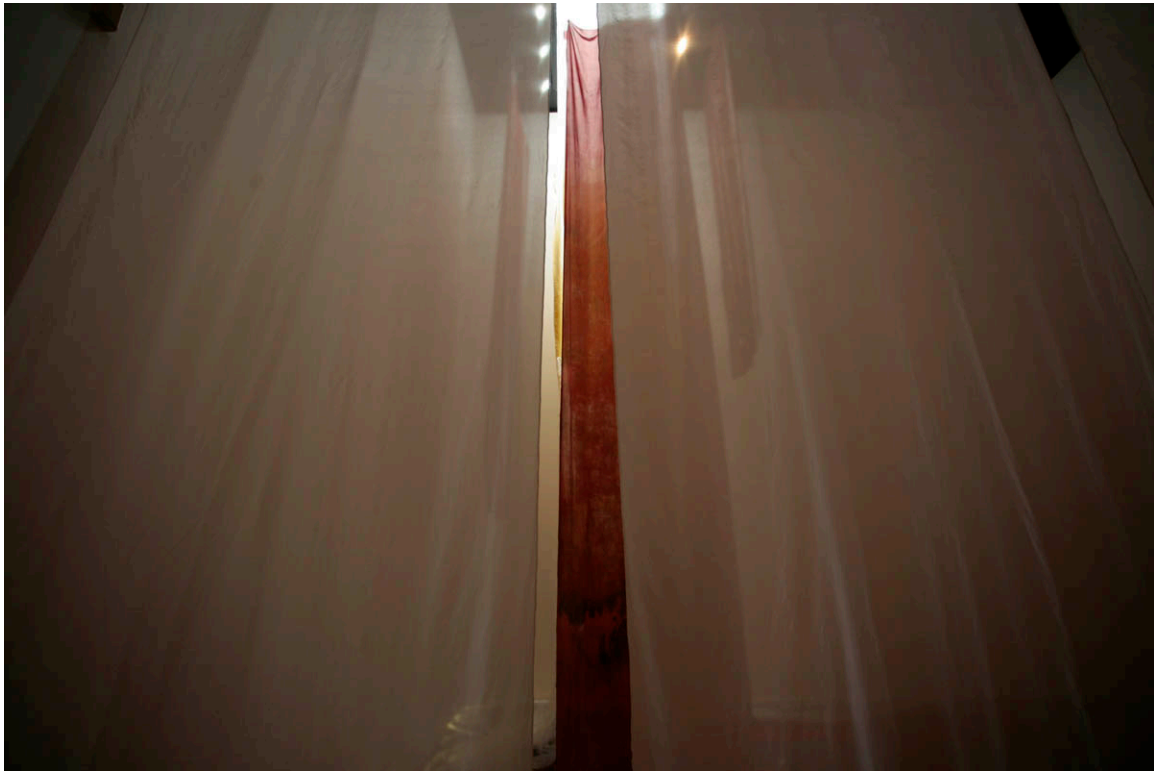
It is from the blueprint of the Old Testament tabernacle, also described as the “tent of meeting” that I determined the layout of my installation. This structure was the center of Jewish religious life and served as the site for the rites of purification and temple sacrifices. The tabernacle was a mobile tent with multiple levels of entry divided by curtains through which laity and the priest would enter. These levels of entry are thus reflected in my installation through the banners of silk and layers within.

The silent lengths gently bow into the space between, the movements pushing out through the veils, as if the installation is taking large breaths, being animated by the invisible.

⁷Swim, *Open Filling*.

*Yet the low whisper comes next,
When we are positioned correctly.
Positioned somewhere between;
Admiration and fear.
Awe and dread.
Wonder and terror.*

The five large panels are set five inches apart, revealing a sliver of the installation inside. A slice of crimson and honey is seen, large enough to reveal but narrow enough to veil. The negative space being filled with color and light alludes to the mystery of eternity. The places where objects touch and merge, or keep their mysterious distance, are filled with a promising sense of 'not yet.' It is said that Robert Smithson proposed to buy all the spaces between buildings in Los Angeles. Can we own the in-between? Can we grasp at the infinite? I frequently find myself standing in that chasm asking others to join me.



We are both physical and spiritual creatures. The reality of living is that we are always in-between. Existing within a body that grows old. Always dying, if you will, yet we live. We move, dance, we touch, and think – all things that are a far cry from dying. The body is locus to this transitional reality – fabric like clothing and skin is fragile. It expresses the unique quality of impermanence⁸. It is because of these qualities that fabric is an apt material, and installation an engaging medium to explore these ideas.

⁸ Doy, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture*, ch. 5.

From under the veiled entrance, red and glowing white tendrils of material pour and pool on the black floor. These tendrils draw us into the center of the piece, while simultaneously spilling toward the other gallery. The skeins extending past the white veil reference the character of the Holy Spirit who, according to Christian theology, is now the active agent in the physical world and the life of the believer. Taking the appearance of hair, water, or smoke, these materials are in a state of transformation. Their aesthetic resemblance to water also relates to the Holy Spirit.

In John 7: 37 -39, Jesus stands up at the last day at the feast of Tabernacles and says, “*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*”



Stepping through the white silk transports you into full view of a column of layers of silk, monofilament and cloth. A shaft of color and light descending from an open skylight thirty feet above dwarfs the viewer's body.



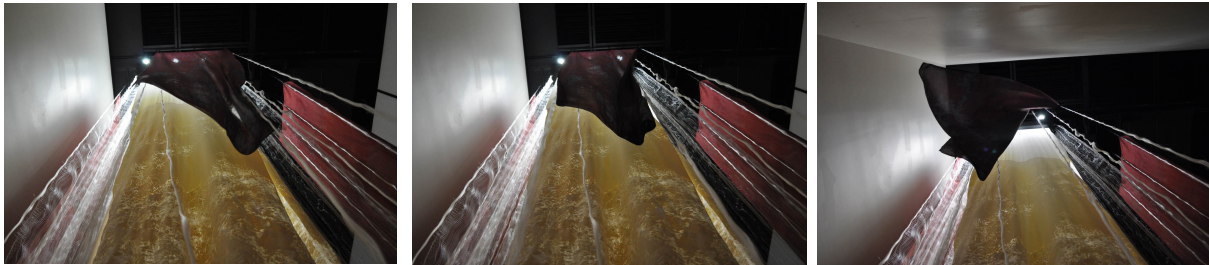
*Surrounded by fabric and light
By movement and gesture
It descends
Robes of righteousness, rushing water, piercing light
Heaping. Layering. Piling. Gathering
A pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud for the day*

I take comfort in the constant reference to fabric in Christian Scripture. These scriptures use textiles in dichotomous ways to communicate the majesty of God, the brevity of the passing earth and human existence, and the extravagantly generous character of the triune God. For example, Psalm 104 proclaims that God clothes himself with honor and majesty, covering himself with light as with a garment, and stretching out the heavens like a tent.⁹ The heavens and earth will someday pass away, but the Lord will remain and his children will dwell in safety.¹⁰

Walking through the installation, the layers envelope you, communicating honor and safety, symbolizing the reality of God's majesty, and His great love for us. The inner layer represents Christ the Son, the monofilament layer signifies the work of the Holy Spirit and the outer layer of red silk symbolizes the character of the Father.

“The opened is emptied”¹¹

Long banners of crimson silk surround the shaft of honeyed light and fabric, descending around the column in a graceful spiral. They ripple, and the vertical lines of their finished edges lead the eye upward. This outer layer represents the majesty of the Godhead, often described as the Father God, physically enthroned above. Skeins of reflective monofilament, like long strands of hair, descend from on high.



⁹ Psalm 104:1-2 “BLESS (AFFECTIONATELY, gratefully praise) the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, You are very great! You are clothed with honor and majesty--[You are the One] Who covers Yourself with light as with a garment, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain or a tent,” *The Amplified Bible*.

¹⁰ Psalm 102:26-28 “They shall perish, but You shall remain and endure; yes, all of them shall wear out and become old like a garment. Like clothing You shall change them, and they shall be changed and pass away. But You remain the same, and Your years shall have no end. The children of Your servants shall dwell safely and continue, and their descendants shall be established before You.” *The Amplified Bible*.

¹¹ Swim, *Open Filling*.

Weavings, as enormous eternal nets, fall from just outside the open skylight, their delicate grids catching and glowing with light. At once recalling the story when Christ redefines his disciples as “fishers of men”, metaphors of living water and baptism, associated with the Holy Spirit.



From here the tendrils fall and spill across the floor mingling with the brilliance of the crimson cloth. Like the train of some elaborate garment spreading out from an entrance in the column, the powerful cloth is a represents the blood of Christ. From this vantage point in the installation I often recall the words of a hymn written by William Cowper in 1772:

*“There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains”.*

The interior panels are constructed from bottom to top with brown diaphanous fabric made from threads, which transition to yellow threads then screen-printed lines. These lines dissipate upward finally becoming whole white cloth. This inner layer represents the body of Christ. Just as Christ was Emmanuel, which means “god with us,” this layer is the portion of the installation closest to our bodies. Jesus is the tangible deity descending toward earth, walking with his followers, and at his Resurrection, ascending again to the Heavens.



The opening, lined in red thread, invites you in, invites you to pull aside the blood-red curtain, touching the brilliant color.



On the day when Christ was crucified,

Matthew 27:50-51 "And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave up His spirit. And at once the curtain of the sanctuary of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth shook and the rocks were split.

This symbolizes the end of our need for an intermediary. Through Christ's sacrifice all people now have access to the Presence of God. It is through this that we enter the Presence of God, and it is through a tear, lined in crimson thread, that the viewer fully enters the installation, *whispers of light | workings of splendor*.

Walking through the curtain of crimson thread you transcend the gallery space around you. The clean light of day spills from above over your head and shoulders. It is safe here, as the threads and cloth welcome your breath by their movement. Their folds sway back and forth like worshipers in motion. Secure and surrounded by opulent color, it is like you are standing behind rushing water.



*To touch a hem.
To be hewn
Behind and before.
Bathed in brilliant light.
Enveloped.
Surrounded by fabric.
Vaporous threads.
There is a space between ceiling and floor.
A liminal existence which radiates Life.
Fragile yet glorious.
An exploration of the unknowable*

Artistic Influences

One of my earliest influences was the Baroque sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini. His works first captivated me during a summer I spent studying in Rome, where I saw many of them first-hand.

I believe that Bernini was one of the earliest installation artists. For example, in his work, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, he controlled nearly every aspect of the viewer's interaction with the sculpture. He manipulated not merely the marble of the sculpture itself, but the lighting, the colors of the marble surrounding it, the paths by which the viewer would approach and leave the sculpture. All of this has the effect of creating a very specific experience for the viewer, an experience somewhere between the ordinary and the divine.

Therefore, I sought to create a similar experience in *whispers of light | workings of splendor* through different material and subject matter. I wanted the viewer to experience a feeling of ascension. To achieve this, I dyed the fabric with a smooth transition to lead the eye upward. Another objective was to create a space set apart within the piece, a peaceful place where the viewer could experience the presence of God tangibly. To accomplish this I used the natural light from one skylight to alter the interior space within the column. The result within this common gallery space was an environment that awes and invites.

The levels of entry and the immersive experience created through *whispers of light | workings of splendor* relate the medium of contemporary installation as well. I choose installation because it is a contemporary and relevant medium, which engages the whole of the viewer. As such, it is especially well suited to communicate the enormity of an omnipresent, yet personal God. Robert Storr said of this discipline,

*"Installation is not a medium you can reduce to essences, it involves materials, processes, and forms to create a situation that viewers have to cope with and reconstruct by movements and questions about what it is exactly that they've actually confronted both physically and conceptually, compounded by an awareness of others in space. In that sense it may be a social form, not a solitary contemplative one."*¹²

¹² Simon, Ann Hamilton, 13.

When considering the space for my installation I looked to the contemporary installation artist Ann Hamilton. Her ability to create site-specific installations, often populated with textiles, influenced my use of fiber within my installation. My search for the connection between the physical reality of being human and the innate desire to become a part of something metaphysical, finds a home among these contemporaries and my own studio practice.

When Toil Becomes Delightful Labor

For months I woke before then sun, taking advantage of those still hours before anyone even got out of bed. Whether it was weaving monofilament, stitching onto elaborate cloths, or measuring lengths on the warping mill, I would perform a work of patient faith.

*In the folds of things
In the silent hours
Repeating the movements with our body, our hands
Cords of Kindness and Messengers of fire
Deep calls unto deep,
In these quiet moments
The unrecorded delight taken in the labors of one's hands*

While reading about process artist Eve Hesse, a phrase written about her work struck a cord deep within me. Lucy Lippard, in her monograph on Hesse, states that the artist's labor intensive processes transcend the cliché of "women's work" and,

"at the same time incorporating these notions of ritual as an antidote to isolation and despair".¹³

Along with Hesse, I find the processes of measuring, tying, and collecting to be an antidote to despair and also a conduit with which I can reflect on the metaphysical. The largest surprise was the intimate trust, which emerged while I was working through the textile processes. These processes allowed a meditative space to grow.

I would enact my liturgy of gesture every morning while listening to hymns or singing them to myself. These became treasured moments, where the needs and toils of my beloved ones would come to my mind. While offering supplications to the Lord for my friends, I would meditate on the majesty of God's glory and the precious gifts he has given to me. The textile processes became a means of worship and connection.

My movements themselves are connected to the experience of worship. As I would wind skeins or lay threads my body would sway, calmly enjoying the graceful movement from spool to hand, and from arm to shoulder. The calming rock back and forth is similar to the movement of bodies in worship, similar to my church family experiencing physically

¹³ Author. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 84.

the intimate presence of God. Often I am taken up by the sound of voices in the sanctuary. Suddenly, I realize that everyone around me was moving in the same way, weaving with their bodies. Not unlike the waters of some enormous sea, perhaps the waters of the soul.

It is curious, yet apt, that the adjectives used to describe the glory of the Lord and his actions are substances of change: rushing waters, diaphanous robes filling the temple, piercing light and blazing fire. The Trinity is an infinite being that is described by elements constantly in flux. Just as with God, these elements are uncontainable and ungraspable.

The hours and days spent devoted to this installation birthed a wonder and hope, which I wish to share with others. My aim is to continue to explore these complex concepts through the medium of contemporary fiber installation and to create spaces that touch upon the reality of human loss and the power offered to us through the Trinity. It is my sincere and humble desire to dive in and drink deeply from these mysteries through a life of art making, even if this means only grasping a small portion of understanding.

“For it is not, after all, really a question about whether you can know the unknown, arrive in it, but how to go about looking for it, how to travel.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 24.

References:

- Author, Elisa. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Translated by E.B. Pusey. London: J.M. Dent & sons, ltd., 1907.
- Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005.
- Buszek, Maria Elena. *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Butler, Cornelia H. and Catherine de Zegher. *onLine: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010.
- Doy, Gen. *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
- Fer, Briony. *The Infinite Line: Re-making art after Modernism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Gordon, Beverly. *Textiles The Whole Story: Uses, Meanings, and Significance*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011.
- Grynsztejn, Madeleine. *Take Your Time: Olafus Eliasson*. San Fransico: San Fransico Museum of Modern Art, 2007.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*. New York: HarperCollins, 1949.
- Petersson, Robert T. *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini and Crashaw*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Rose, Barbara. *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Simon, Joan. *Ann Hamilton: An Inventory of Objects*. New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2006.
- Simon, Joan. *Ann Hamilton*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002.
- Snodin, Michael, and Nigel Llewellyn, eds. *Baroque: Style in the Age Magnificence 1620- 1800*. London: V & A Publishing, 2009.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005.
- Sussman, Elizabeth, ed. *Eva Hesse*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Swim, Carrie. "Open Filling". *Inkhouse*. Self Published: 2011.
- The Amplified Bible*. Ed. Frances Siewert., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987.